Tessellation: At Greater Length

By: Suzume CA

In which Kan'u, following an unexpected kiss from Chou'un, seeks answers. In the Bath. (After all, this IS Koihime Musou.) Set between South Side of the Sky and What All the Fuss is About.

Status: complete

Published: 2012-07-23

Words: 3955

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Romance/Friendship - Characters: Chōun S./Sei, Kan'u U./Aisha - Reviews: 10 - Favs: 18 - Follows: 7

Original source: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/8351539/1/Tessellation-At-Greater-Length

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

Tessellation: At Greater Length

Introduction
Tessellation: At Greater Length

Tessellation: At Greater Length

FOREWORD: This story takes place after the events of *South Side of the Sky*, which in turn takes place between episodes eight and nine of *Shin Koihime Musou - Otome Tairan* . It also takes place after chapter four of *Yamihime: Wings of the Butterfly* (and the subsequent epilogue, for that matter, but I haven't written that yet).

At Greater Length

by Suzume CA

In the end, Kan'u could not be sure whether impatience or concern played the greater part in her decision to eventually follow Chou'un to the bathhouse. It had been close to three hours now, and even though Chou'un had insisted that she would not be in any condition for debriefing until after a long bath, this was nonetheless getting silly. How long was she going to spend in there, anyway?

Of course, knowing what she now knew after hearing Bachou's account of their recent travels to seek the rare Persistence Herb, there was certainly a level of concern for her fellow general's health. It would not do at all for the formidable Chou Shiryuu to meet the ignoble end of passing out and drowning herself in the bath: someone needed to check on her, and Kan'u reasoned that it might as well be her.

Not that there could be any other reason, of course: she was the commander of an army, and she needed a full report from one of her subordinates, that was all. It certainly had nothing at all to do with the… unusual way Chou'un had greeted her upon her return to the village.

" *There is one other thing, Aisha, that will **not** wait," Chou'un said to her then, giving Kan'u a strange, intent look. "Sui, would you hold my spear for a moment?"*

" *What is it?" Kan'u asked, her mind suddenly filled with concern regarding what might have befallen the two of them during their trek to Mount Tai.*

Rather than reply with words, though, Chou'un placed one warm hand to each side of Kan'u's face, leaned in, and kissed her tenderly and deeply. Kan'u felt her eyes go wide with shock, but she found herself either unable to pull away, or…

*An indistinct blur of moments later, Chou'un stepped away from her, turned back to a surprised (but apparently amused) Bachou, and took her spear in hand again. "I'll be happy to discuss **that** with you at greater length as well, if you wish," she said, giving Kan'u a very odd look. "After a bath, of course."*

Kan'u paused at the door to the bathhouse and took a deep breath. No, it certainly had nothing at all to do with that kiss. And it had even less to do with the look in Chou'un's eyes afterward: it had simply been unusual to see such intensity from her companion without the customary teasing, smug smirk to go with it. She had not been able to get it out of her head in the hours since because it had been so uncharacteristic. That was all.

And maybe, Kan'u reasoned internally, if she continued telling herself that she might actually start believing it.

Sighing explosively in an attempt to chase away her apprehensions, Kan'u opened the door to the bath and stepped inside. The first thing she noticed was a head of pale blue hair resting on the rim of the raised stone tub, with a slender arm stretched out to either side.

"Good evening, Aisha," Chou'un said without turning around.

"How did you know it was me?" Kan'u asked as she closed the door behind her.

"You have a very unique cadence to your footsteps. Now, as much as I might dream otherwise, I sense you are not here to join me in the water?"

Kan'u stepped closer, and even though the thick steam of the hot bath obscured most details of the other woman, she found herself needing to avert her eyes. It suddenly occurred to her that for all their time as traveling companions, she and Chou'un had never once shared a bath.

Instead, she settled for sitting beside the rectangular tub so that she and Chou'un were back to back. She briefly considered putting her arms up on the rim as well to mirror Chou'un's, but instead she found herself clasping her hands in her lap. "I came to make sure you hadn't turned into a mass of wrinkles," Kan'u said in reply. "How long do you intend to stay in here? You've already missed dinner."

"Actually, I've only recently gotten in," Chou'un admitted. "There's a little inn on the outskirts of the village where they serve some of the best menma I've ever encountered. Priorities being what they are…"

"Of course," Kan'u nodded. That was the Chou'un she knew.

"I do hope Shion isn't offended that I missed dinner," Chou'un considered. "I'll be sure to apologize to her later."

"No one was offended, Sei," Kan'u sighed. Concerned, maybe. Worried, possibly.

Chou'un said nothing in reply, and a thick silence stretched out between them, broken only by the sounds of the water flowing in and out of the tub. Eventually, Kan'u cleared her throat and spoke again. "Sui told me about what happened on your mission."

"Ah, then you needn't hear the story again from me. I'll thank her later for sparing me from the necessity of a debriefing."

"Actually, I'm very interested in hearing your side of it, Sei…"

"I'm sure Sui was forthcoming with details."

"Yes, very much so. Including the small detail about you nearly dying."

This had the rare effect of putting Chou'un at an apparent loss for words, so Kan'u went on. "And the accompanying details, of course. The way you were trapped in a cave during a terrible blizzard, and divided up your remaining food, only for you to starve yourself so that Sui could survive to complete the mission… does any of this sound familiar, Sei?"

"It was my decision, Aisha. For the mission to be a success, only one of us needed to survive."

Kan'u found herself forcibly suppressing a clenched feeling in her throat. "Sui is still very upset about that, you know. Do you know what she said to me? She wondered how you could possibly have thought that she wouldn't try to save you. Sei, do you really think so poorly of her?"

"I wasn't thinking of it in that way," Chou'un sighed. "Had things not gone the way they had, I would have made sure that she was not put in that position."

"What exactly is *that* supposed to mean?"

"I had hoped that I could last longer than I did," Chou'un said in an even voice. "I've gone more than three days without food before. I can only assume the elements took an additional toll, and to my shame, delirium overtook me before I could finish what I started."

"Go on," Kan'u said quietly, not liking where this was going at all.

"Had my mind and body not betrayed me, I would have waited until I was at my limit, then left behind my pack while Sui was asleep, and… disappeared."

Kan'u shivered in spite of the thick, steamy warmth of the bathhouse. She could picture it all too well: Chou'un willingly "disappearing" into the storm and quickly freezing to death, thus taking the decision out of Bachou's hands. "It didn't occur to you that she would have tried to find you? Even at the risk of her own life?"

"At the time, I hoped that she would be more… *sensible* than that. To be completely honest, Aisha, I did not believe that Sui would have risked herself in that way… at least not for *my* sake."

For a moment, Kan'u wanted to reiterate her earlier feelings about how Chou'un could think such a thing of their friend, but those last words tripped her up. "Wait, what do you mean, for *your* sake?"

"I… never would have presumed that Sui held me in sufficient regard to put *my* life above the success of the mission," Chou'un said delicately. "When I learned otherwise, I was… humbled. Grateful, but humbled."

"How could you think that she wouldn't try to save you?" Kan'u whispered. "How could you think that *any* of us wouldn't try?"

Chou'un did not reply, but the silence spoke volumes. It wasn't that she presumed Bachou would not save her: it was that she did not consider herself to be worth saving. "You're not expendable, Sei," Kan'u went on. "You're a brilliant commander, a warrior of very few peers, and… we *need* you." Then, more quietly, she said " *I* need you."

There was a quiet splashing sound, as though Chou'un were changing position, and when her voice came, it seemed somehow closer. " *You*… need *me* ?"

"Yes," Kan'u said, feeling that uncomfortable tightness in her throat increasing.

"As a commander and a warrior?"

Kan'u sighed noisily. "Yes, all of those things, but… more than any of that we need you because *you're Sei* . Don't you *dare* make me imagine what the world would be like without a Sei in it. Who would take the conversation in random directions just to see if the rest of us could follow? Who would shamelessly flirt with me, and make embarrassing comments about my virginity, and keep accidentally groping me on purpose?"

"I was under the impression that these things caused you more exasperation than anything else," Chou'un said evenly. "I suppose I thought that…"

When Chou'un trailed off, unable to finish the thought, Kan'u felt her temper suddenly rise. "You thought what? That I'd be better off without you? That I'd be relieved that you wouldn't be around to tease me anymore? Is that what you think you are to me, Sei?"

"Then what *am* I to you, Aisha?"

With that one simple question, Kan'u found her anger fleeing her, and she suddenly felt at a loss for words. How could she describe it when she didn't understand it herself? "You're… you're Sei," she sighed. "You're my friend, and… you're important to me." She was floundering at this point, and she knew it, but the words simply would not come. "I don't want you to… to not be here."

There came a quiet sound from over her shoulder then: the barest hint of Chou'un's customary chuckle. "Very well, Aisha," she said in a soft voice, very close to Kan'u's ear, and then there was another soft splash as she again changed position in the bath.

"That's it, then? I get a 'very well, Aisha,' and that's it? No innuendo? No teasing?"

"No teasing," Chou'un agreed. "It may come as a surprise to you that I am a woman of very few dreams, Aisha. One of these… is to never leave your side. So if you truly wish for me to 'be here,' it would be my honor, my privilege, and… my pleasure."

At the last word, Kan'u felt herself blush, once again vividly remembering that kiss. "Sei?"

"Hmm?"

There was a lengthy pause as Kan'u considered whether or not she truly wanted to ask this question. "You kissed me," she said instead.

"Indeed."

"That was my first, you know," Kan'u informed her, letting some reproach creep into her tone.

"An honor I shall cherish to my dying day," Chou'un whispered.

"That almost sounded like you meant it."

"Every word," Chou'un sighed. "I hope the experience was not… disturbing to you, Aisha. Perhaps it was selfish of me, but when I awakened after Mount Tai, and realized that Sui had saved me against all odds and all common sense, I… suppose I realized that I could not waste this second chance. I could not let another day go by without showing you… what you are to me."

"And what *am* I to you, Sei?" Kan'u asked, giving voice to the question she had dodged moments before.

"As I said before, I am a woman of few dreams, but… the ones I have are dear to me. Do you remember when I went missing in the fog?"

"Which time?"

"The first time."

"Ah."

"There was a period of many weeks during which I lost your trail completely," Chou'un said, still sounding a bit chagrined at this. "And while I was on my own, I met another black-haired warrior. She rather reminded me of you: driven, talented, road-tested and yet somehow still very innocent. She was on a quest to find her true love, and had been through many hardships during her travels. And in that, she reminded me of something else, as well."

"Go on," Kan'u prompted her.

"She reminded me that some dreams are worth the hardship. Even in the midst of crushing despair, even after nearly meeting her death, she held firmly to the dream that she would find her lost love. And even knowing that it might never be, it was still worth the journey. I envied her that feeling of true love, and she challenged me to find it in myself. A love that could inspire me to continue my own journey, and to do what must be done, even if it seemed impossible, and even if it led to my own death. And as she said that to me… she reminded me that I already held such a thing in my heart, even as unworthy as I felt of it."

"What are you saying, Sei?" Kan'u asked, her voice suddenly shaking with emotion.

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Maybe, but I need to hear you say it."

"Very well," Chou'un said with a soft chuckle, again shifting in the bath. "I love you, Unchou-dono."

"Sei," Kan'u whispered, turning to face the other woman. To her surprise, Chou'un had risen to her knees, so that the steaming water left her bare from the waist up. Further words died in her throat as Kan'u took in the sight of the other woman, and she made several realizations all at once.

First, she remembered that along with never having shared a bath with Chou'un, Kan'u had only once seen her nude, and it had been briefly and from a considerable distance. For all her teasing, flirtatious nature, Chou'un was very private when it came to her own body. Kan'u found her eyes drawn upward, from the smooth skin around her navel, to the considerable rise of her breasts, and finally settling on her prominent collarbones, and the hollow space in her throat where they met. The collar and sleeves of her kimono had always hidden her shoulders and neck, and Kan'u knew that she was seeing something that few had beheld. Somehow, those smooth lines were a greater mystery than the curves beneath them, and Kan'u could not tear her eyes away.

Individual droplets of water, gleaming in the soft light, fell from Chou'un's damp hair and collected there in the hollow of her throat, and Kan'u also realized, to her own shock, that she would very much like to know what that water tasted like.

All this in mind, Kan'u further realized that Chou'un was very serious in what she was saying. More serious, perhaps, than Kan'u had ever heard her.

"This may also come as a surprise to you," Chou'un went on, quietly, "but I occasionally have difficulty expressing myself in words. I've wanted to tell you this since the day I joined your defense of this village. I came close once, on the night I told you that if you left on a journey, I would surely be at your side, but… I was afraid to."

"Chou Shiryuu, afraid?" Kan'u tried to laugh, but it came out as a nervous quaver.

"It has been known to happen on occasion," Chou'un nodded, a shadow of her smirk returning. "I suppose I hoped that things would work out on their own, or at worst, they would remain the same, and I could continue hoping for a miracle." Her face darkened. "It shames me that I've waited as long as this, but now you know the truth. I love you, Aisha, and would gladly be yours, heart and body and soul."

Kan'u found it difficult to meet the other woman's gaze, so she stood up and then settled herself on the edge of the bath, with her back to the water. Chou'un shifted to sit beside her, but with her legs still in the water, so that they were facing opposite directions. "I'm not sure what to say," Kan'u whispered.

"Perhaps you could start by telling me whether or not I hope in vain?"

"I don't know how to answer that either."

"Then perhaps you could start by considering whether or not you think you could ever love another woman? Or have my clumsy shows of affection and Sousou-dono's aggressive pursuit poisoned those waters for good?"

Kan'u blushed at the reminder of some of those "clumsy" moments, up to and including that kiss. "I… I just don't know, Sei," she admitted. "I've been attracted to men before, but… I'm constantly surrounding myself with strong, beautiful women. I can't say I haven't had… *thoughts*…"

"Hmm. Good thoughts, I hope?"

"Sometimes… But… as you never let me forget, I *am* still a virgin. I suppose I just don't know what all the fuss is about yet."

"Words cannot adequately describe my desire to demonstrate this."

"That's the Sei I know," Kan'u snorted.

"I speak only the truth. But if it is not in your heart to love another woman, I would not be so presumptuous to believe that a simple roll in the sheets would change that." Chou'un paused and sighed. "Aisha, I have no right to demand an answer from you, but… I beg you, if my hopes are indeed in vain, tell me as soon as you are certain."

"Would you… leave?" Kan'u whispered, feeling a tightening in her chest at the thought of it.

Chou'un shook her head. "Never. My spear has been pledged to you from the beginning. Even if it is not my destiny to be your lover, I would sooner die than leave your back unguarded."

"I don't know if that makes it easier or harder," Kan'u sighed. "I already told you I don't want you to not be here, but… I also don't want you to stay beside me if it makes you miserable."

"Then… it appears I have your answer," Chou'un said quietly. She then took a measured breath. "I thank you for making it quick, Aisha."

For a moment, Kan'u could not figure out what the other woman was saying, but then she replayed her last words in her mind and realized how that must have sounded. "I didn't mean that as a denial, Sei! I just… I don't know yet!"

"Then it's not… impossible?" Chou'un asked, looking up to meet Kan'u's eyes. The expression of naked hope was something Kan'u had never seen before from her companion, for whom the guise of *Kachou Kamen* was in no way her only mask.

"The idea of being… lovers… is not… *repulsive* to me, certainly."

"Ah, Aisha," Chou'un smiled. "With words of love such as these, it's amazing you're still a pure woman."

"Now you're making fun of me!"

"Forgive me. Force of habit. Pay it no mind."

Kan'u's face flushed. "Dammit, Sei, would you just shut up and let me tell you that I love you too?"

There was a long silence, during which Kan'u's face darkened further as she realized what she had just said.

"While that was not *exactly* the confession I dreamed of," Chou'un said in a small, breathy voice, "who am I to complain?"

With a sigh, Kan'u rubbed both hands over her face, as if to push back the warm feeling in her skin. "But I don't know if I can be what you want me to be. This is… something scarier than any battlefield. I can't just leap into it."

"If we are to liken it to a battlefield," Chou'un replied, "then you must know that I'll always have your back."

"Is that another naughty metaphor?" Kan'u asked, falling back into the safety of humor.

"Not this time, no. I understand your hesitation better than you know, Aisha. I would not ask you to leap into anything. But if you would have me, I will accompany you in every small step you should take. Even if you eventually choose a tactical retreat."

Kan'u nodded slowly, then steeled herself to take that first small step. She leaned closer to the woman she had always trusted with her back, and softly kissed her lips for the second time. Afterward, when she opened her eyes, she could not be sure if the moisture she saw on Chou'un's face was condensation from the steam, or something else entirely.

There were many questions yet to be answered, but that had been as good a start as she could have imagined. Feeling strangely emboldened by this first step, she decided to take another. After giving Chou'un a shy smile, she stepped away from the bath and began the laborious process of undressing.

"Aisha," Chou'un said quietly, "you have a strange way of *not* leaping into things."

"It occurred to me earlier that you and I have never shared a bath," Kan'u replied, her smile widening. "I think that's a small enough step,

as long as the formidable Chou Shiryuu can keep her hands to herself."

"This is revenge for all the times I've teased you in the past, isn't it?"

As she finished undressing and picked up a towel for herself, Kan'u found that she rather enjoyed the look of numb shock on Chou'un's face, and she could not deny that it was… well, it was actually kind of *thrilling* . She knew that there were many steps yet ahead of her, but if they were anything like this, then perhaps it was a road worth traveling after all.

Kan'u eventually discovered that the water tasted mildly of sulphur, but by that time she was past caring.

The End

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Honestly, I'm not entirely satisfied with this as a prelude to *What All the Fuss is About*, mostly based on tone. Things got… well, more serious than I expected. However, I can't expect that a love affair between these two (or, well, any love affair involving Sei) wouldn't find its way back to whimsy and teasing in good time.

I will keep this space open for further gap-filling short stories with various Koihime characters. I have a thing or two in the works already, and I guess I'll see what happens. Thank you for reading!